

Chapter

Religionless in Seattle

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Introduction

This is my computer. There are many like it, but this one is mine. My computer is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it, as I must master my life. Without me, my computer is useless. Without my computer, I am useless. (Coupland 1996: 104–05)

Douglas Coupland's *MicroSerfs* tells the story of a group of mid-1990s information technology (IT) workers living in the eastern suburbs of Seattle in Washington State. Based loosely around the real life experiences of Microsoft employees, this paradigmatic novel frames the life of the dot-com era computer geek with remarkable precision. Spending hours a day staring blindly into their computer monitors, the computer science (CS) professionals gladly exchange their social lives, their families, and at times their health, for writing code for their enigmatic boss 'Bill'. There is an almost religious devotion to IT that is evinced by most of Coupland's characters; for them personal identity has become utterly subsumed under their all-encompassing concern for working in the IT industry. Hence the quote, "Without my computer, I am useless."

For Coupland's characters, technology has become a central facet in the construction of self-identity and personal values. Indeed, it is a commonly posited thesis (see below) that technology – and in this case, IT – can pose

significant challenges to values, both social and religious. In this chapter, I wish to test this thesis and determine the extent of IT's impact on the religious self-identity of IT workers, who, like those in Coupland's *MicroSerfs*, seek to master their computers as they master their lives. This chapter will endeavour to tap into the professional computer geek sub-culture to determine if working within a computer profession and living within a computer savvy culture necessarily results in the creation of a pseudo-theological worldview which challenges or replaces traditional religious beliefs and practices. I will explore these questions within the context of the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, with particular focus on the Seattle metropolitan area.¹

Given the confluence of a low self-selection for religious identity in Seattle and the region's high rate of employment within the IT industry (not to mention the technological ethos of the area, which is difficult to measure), it seems like an apt location to investigate if one's involvement within the IT and CS industry informs one's religious self-identity. I will begin by offering a brief survey of key literature, which outlines the potential relationship between theology and

¹ My study makes use of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, the North American Religion Atlas (NARA), the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), and the 2000 National Surveys of Religion and Politics (NRSP). Most of my data on the growth and history of the Church in the Pacific Northwest is provided by the recent text *Religion & Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None-Zone*, which is an interpretation of the newly released NARA, ARIS and NRSP studies. Additionally, I rely on my ongoing conversations with individuals working within the IT economy in the wider Seattle area. I do not intend the findings from my own qualitative research as a participant observer to be construed as normative or even statistically relevant. I have pursued qualitative and indeed narrative examples of the religious life of technology in the Pacific Northwest for the purpose of uncovering specific stories of religiosity within the industry to illuminate the thesis of this project.

technology, in order to provide a basic framework for what I call 'techno-theology'. Following this, I hope to determine if techno-theologies are at play within the IT culture of the Pacific Northwest by providing an overview of the region's religious and vocational landscape. This will be done in three phases. Firstly, I will correlate national employment statistics with regional religious demographics in order to determine if regions with unusually high percentages of CS workers have a disproportionately low rate of religious affiliation. Secondly, I will provide a narrative profile of my own experiences as a participant observer working as an IT professional at a Seattle internet media company. Thirdly, I will explore the relationship between religion and technology described in three case studies of technology workers. I will then reflect on the way this kind of theological, historical, vocational and cultural analysis can contribute to the work of Christian ministry in the region.

Pursuing Techno-Theology

The role played by IT in contemporary life is undeniably significant. That most of us scarcely understand the machinations behind the vast global networks of information which we use in our daily lives (whether when flicking on the TV, checking e-mail, paying our bills or buying a sandwich with our credit cards at a local shop) says something about both the ubiquity of IT and its relative transparency to those who casually use it. Public and private corporations spend billions of dollars a year to update IT infrastructures in order to stay on the

'bleeding edge' of technology. In education, universities are under constant pressure to maintain the appearance of technological savvy to attract students who expect wireless internet around every corner, online course materials and technically competent lecturers. Because IT is both all around us and yet often invisible to the naked eye, we must endeavour to place our use of technology under the microscope, to better determine its impact upon the lived-life. What precisely is technology and how does theology engage with it?

For this chapter, space does not permit to engage in a dialogue with the likes of Dessauer (1972), Heidegger (1993), Ellul (1965), Ihde (1991) or Borgmann (2003) – to name only some key figures – in our effort to establish a 'proper' philosophy of technology. For the sake of brevity, I wish to only introduce the thought of Paul Tillich (1981); as a philosophical theologian with a keen interest in the cultural milieu, his reflections on technology and culture are informative for the work at hand.

Clearly, Tillich's notion of technology was rather different from our own. Writing in the early twentieth century, his work on the subject centred on industrial and military technologies rather than on communications and information technologies. Nonetheless, his analysis of creation and innovation within the technical *gestalt* is useful. Rather than focusing purely on the human agency in the use of technology, Tillich's latent philosophy of technology allows us to consider the material substrate as a viable object for theological reflection. His work opens our analysis to the cultural world created by technology,

inclusive of its design, fabrication, use and dissemination.

For Tillich, the realm of technology is the realm of innovation. Technological manufacture is the introduction of something into the world which is an improvement upon a pre-existing condition and not, significantly for Tillich, pure creativity. For him, “invention is in principle *subject to obsolescence*, while creation is inherently infinite and can become obsolete only on its technical side and never on its creative side” (106). Like Heidegger’s later work, Tillich later makes a distinction between technology (as a conveyance of invention) and high art (as a conveyance of creativity). Heidegger (1993: 338–40) approached the problem by arguing that in the light of modern technology’s use in the contemporary world, technologies can no longer function as a means of *poiesis* (in a kind of in-breaking revelation). For both early-to-mid twentieth-century thinkers, high art appears to be the only poietic outlet in modern life. Yet, unlike Heidegger, Tillich (1981: 106) is willing to examine the liminal space “where ‘art’ or craftsmanship ends and science begins”, at the nexus of *poiesis* and *praxis*, creativity and rationality, technology and the arts.

Although the ideal form of technology would seem to exist as the instantiation of scientific reflection upon a given goal, in reality this reflection is often superseded by a form of “instinctive, acquired, and inherited *praxis*. And *praxis* retains its position even when science has been in effect for the longest time” (ibid). In this regard, technology reveals its latent ambiguity. It is neither pure theory nor pure action; all technologies reveal elements of both rationality

and creativity. Within the technical act, “*science and craftsmanship* both cooperate and contend with each other” (ibid: 107).

Thus, for Tillich, technology can be viewed both essentially and existentially. Essentially, technology is purely an extension of scientific rationality, designed to impose heterogonous goals upon materiality in an autogenous manner. Existentially, technology appeals beyond the sciences to a more spiritual dimension, whereby instinct transforms calculative praxis into an artistic form of craftsmanship. It is the aspect of the existential-spiritual nature of technology which informs my own analysis of IT culture below.

Within IT, the ambiguity or paradox between creativity and rationality is clearly evident. One is both able to employ technologies of information to extend the calculating reach of markets, militaries and economies, while simultaneously using the same technologies to openly distribute innovative research or artistic materials. Indeed, IT’s ability to serve calculating and creative ends lends it the appearance of neutrality, whereby it seems to be able to facilitate both ethically appealing and ethically abhorrent activities.² Yet Tillich would encourage us instead to view technology’s seemingly neutral characteristic as a paradox or ambiguity. The difference between ambiguity and neutrality is significant. When characterized as ambiguous, both the negative and the positive characteristics of an entity can be affirmed in tension; however, when an entity is characterised as

² Indeed, such a view of IT’s neutrality was consistently articulated within my case studies, most of whom resisted assigning any kind of ethical value to technology, conferring the onus of ethical responsibility to the end user of technologies, themselves.

neutral, neither the negative nor the positive can be affirmed. Ambiguous views of technology allow us to examine a technology by way of critical theological and ethical inquiry, whereas a neutral view of technology would limit our analyses to the agency of technology users alone. An ambiguous understanding of technology holds in tension technology's potential for both creative and destructive purposes, thus enabling us to assign ethical significance to the whole of a material culture, including, but not limited to, the agents within this culture.

The standing thesis is that technology – and in this case, IT – contributes to the radical construction of identity, community, ethics and even religious faith. Given the ambiguities of a Tillichian technological *gestalt*, this would seem feasible. Within theology, philosophy and cultural studies, this ambiguity is often styled in destructive or even apocalyptic terms. Current commentators are quick to pick up on the latent ambiguity. In his *Techgnosis*, cultural commentator Eric Davis (1998) explores the subaltern cultures given voice and form by information technologies. He reflects on the capacity of any new technology to “partially reconstruct the self and its world, creating new opportunities (and new traps) for thought, perception, and social experience” (3). Likewise, philosopher Albert Borgmann (1984) has voiced concern that contemporary technologies (inclusive of information technologies) disorient our proper concern for the good life, by entrapping us within a technological system which principally seeks to entertain and to perpetuate what he calls the ‘device paradigm’ (a shorthand for blind consumerism in a technological age). There is little time for religious

devotion in Borgmann's dystopian vision of a highly technologized society (246). This theme is echoed in Christian theology, by Graham Ward in his *Cities of God* (2000) where Ward seeks to find an ontological connection between IT and the human being, asserting that computer-mediated subjectivities, such as those of the 'cyborg/clone', speak to deeply theological notions of embodied identity (206). Yet Ward appears to be sceptical of communities and selves that are constituted through the mediation of IT, when mediation is a substitution for, or ancillary to, Christology or Eucharistic practices.

Beyond cultural studies, philosophy and theology, many technology practitioners and speculative scientists centre on the positive or even redemptive aspects of technology, couching their discussion of the ambiguous potential of IT in pseudo-religious terms. Physicist Frank Tipler (1994) holds to an eschatological vision of IT: in his *Physics of Immortality*, a future information processing device is ascribed the potential to facilitate a universal resurrection of the dead through cosmic computer simulations (138). Perhaps more in the realm of contemporary possibilities are the writings of technologists Ray Kurzweil (1999) and Hans Moravec (1988) where we read of a not too distant future when the human mind may be uploaded into a sufficiently robust computer substrate, facilitating a radical life extension for the lucky few who will be able to afford it. We could also look to the themes developed in artificial intelligence research which link computation with our understanding of consciousness or even with the construction of alternative forms of the soul or personhood (see Minsky

1986). It goes without saying that the spiritual dimension of information processing technologies has been a common theme in science-fiction literature and film.

The theological relevance of contemporary IT is a fascinating area of research. As a Christian practical theologian, I am keenly interested in the way cultures produce forms of expressing something akin to a Tillichian sense of Ultimate Concern. I have argued elsewhere that in the works of those listed above we find the appearance of a kind of techno-theology, where technology is invested with the potential to convey the Ultimate (DeLashmutt 2006). Wherever and whenever technology is reified and allowed to become the bearer of utopian or eschatological promise or dystopian projections, it carries within it a modicum of techno-theology.³ In the extravagant examples of Kurzweil's *Spiritual Machines* or Moravec's *Mind Children* or in the more mundane references to new information technologies as a way of unravelling the mystery of consciousness or in the rhetoric that IT can bring about universal solidarity by breaking down communication barriers, I have argued, technology serves as a spring-board for a heretical eschatology and soteriology where transcendent possibilities are exchanged for the promises of immanently realisable solutions.

But the nagging question remains: does anyone outside the academy or

³ Techno-theology emerges when technologies are reified and divorced from their material and historical contexts. When concrete, materially and culturally instantiated technologies give way to flights of fancy, we lose sight of 'technologies' and begin to centre our hopeful musings upon wondrous Technology (the capital 'T' is intended). Technology removed from its social or economic context easily spirals into myth, transforming itself into a form of ultimate concern (see also DeLashmutt 2006: 268).

part from a handful of technologists actually recognize that techno-theology is at play within everyday life? Does the literature about technology and society really represent the actual experiences of technology practitioners? If techno-theology is as pervasive as the thesis articulated above seems to maintain, surely technology practitioners would evince substantially different religious orientations in contrast to those in less IT-centred vocations or cultures. Indeed, it would seem that being involved with technology would radically diminish one's interest in organized religious practices, as technology would seem to offer a plausible functional alternative to religious devotion. In what follows, I attempt to test this thesis in three ways. Firstly, I wish to determine if there is a correlation between high levels of employment within the CS industry for a region and low rates of self-selection for religious adherence. Secondly, I want to offer my own qualitative data which I collected as a participant observer working within the dot-com sector as a CS professional in Seattle. Lastly, I wish to offer some representative case studies which explore the relationship between faith and technology among individuals of varying levels of religious affiliation within the IT industry.

Regional Religious Demographics

Coupland's depiction of the silicon forests of Seattle still resonate with many who work within the IT sector in the city today. Seattle, Washington, is a place renowned for its role in the internet economy. Within the greater metropolitan

area lie the campuses of Microsoft, Amazon, Real Media and hundreds of small internet corporations. Living in Seattle one quickly gains the impression that the city's population is comprised of the young, the affluent, the well educated, and the technically savvy. According to the 2000 census, 31% of Seattle's population are in the 20-34 year-old age bracket, compared to 21% nationally (Seattle Department of Planning and Development). The state is also one of the most affluent in the country, with the thirteenth highest median income nationally and the second highest in the Western region. Further, 30.9% of adult Washingtonians are in possession of a Bachelor's degree, making this population the most well-educated state in the West and the ninth in the nation.

Despite a decline in employment in the technology industry following the burst of the dot-com bubble in December 2001, there were, in May 2006, over 93,500 people employed within in the IT/CS fields in the State of Washington, a 10% increase in the field since the height of the dot-com bubble in 2001 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001; 2006). Today the city has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation, hovering around 3.9%. As a leader in the IT sector, Seattle has the second highest percentage of computer technology workers (compared to the total percentage of workers) in the Western United States and the tenth highest overall. It is clear that once again IT is a leading source of the region's economic activity.

Like other West Coast cities, the core urban neighbourhoods have undergone continual gentrification throughout the past decade, driving up

housing prices and driving out blue collar workers. Luxury cars are parked outside of 1920s bungalows, where 40-inch flat-screen televisions project the aura of middle class affluence on to the streets below. Among this upwardly mobile population, participation in organized religion is exceptionally low. The city is located in a distinctively non-religious region, as fewer people in the Pacific Northwest self-select for a religious affiliation than in any other region of the United States. In other words, there are more people who choose 'none' as their religious self-identity here than anywhere else in the USA.⁴ Whereas 59.4% of the nation admit to some kind of religious affiliation, the three constituent states in the region (Oregon, Washington and Alaska, combined) have an average adherence rate of 37.2% (Killen and Shibley 2004: 26). The region is a spiritual and sociological anomaly compared to national data.

Employment Statistics and Religious Affiliation

Given the potency of techno-theology described above, I wonder if one of the reasons why the Seattle metropolitan area has such a low religious adherence rate has to do with the role played by IT workers and the information economy within the city's cultural ethos. To test if working in the computer technology industry somehow breeds scepticism or indifference regarding religious belief, I have examined other metropolitan areas which are marked by a high number of computer technology workers in order to determine if they also have a similarly

⁴ Nationwide, 40.6% of the population identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated, whereas 62.8% of the Pacific Northwest do so. Nationally, 14% claim no religious identity, whereas in the region 25% describe themselves as non-religious. (see Shibley 2004: 141)

higher percentage of unaffiliated persons. I correlated data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics with data from the North American Religion Atlas (NARA),⁵ selecting the eleven metropolitan areas nationwide which have the highest percentage of CS workers in the total working population. Although in any one of the cities CS workers only make up a small percentage of the workers overall (and an even smaller percentage of the general population), the pull of the so-called information economy is strong enough for CS to be perceived, subjectively, as a major influence within the city's culture.

The top eleven cities in the country for CS-related employment are San Jose, CA; Boulder, CO; the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV metropolitan area; Framingham, MA; Huntsville, AL; Durham, NC; Bethesda, MD; Seattle, WA; Colorado Springs, CO; San Francisco, CA; and Austin, TX. I have cross-referenced these metropolitan areas with the NARA data which contain statistics for religious affiliation by region. If computer technology produces some kind of rival theological world view, it would seem logical that within the regions that have the highest percentage of CS workers, a decline in religious affiliation would be indicated. However, as Chart 1.1 (below) shows, the difference between the regional averages of un-affiliation rates and the rates of affiliation within the individual counties in which the cities are located indicate that (with regard to the CS sector) no definite correlation can be made

⁵ NARA is the project of the Polis Center of Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis. It was created as an interactive website based upon the 2000 census, the 2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Survey compiled by the Glenmary Research Center and supplemented by ARIS (American Religious Identification Survey) and other datasets.

between a region's employment data and its overarching rate of religious affiliation. Although the rate of unaffiliated persons within these metropolitan areas does vary from regional norms, the differences appear to fluctuate in both directions. It would seem that there is no strong correlation between the density of technology workers in a region and that region's general religious culture. In fact, in King County (the county in which Seattle is located), the affiliation rate goes up when it is compared to both the state and regional norms.

What is Significant about the Northwest Region?

If technology is not to account for Seattle's low rates of religious affiliation, what other factors could be considered? A combination of historical, environmental, social-psychological and economic reasons can prove insightful. As noted above, in contrast with other regions in the country, the Pacific Northwest is strikingly non-religious. According to the NARA data, the religiously unaffiliated make up 62.8% of the population in the Pacific Northwest, compared to 34.1% in the Mid-Atlantic Region, 41% in the Midwest, 38.5% in New England, 47.3% in the Pacific, 48.3% in the Rocky Mountain West, 40.3% in the South and 32.5% in the Southern Crossroads.

Historically, religions have failed to maintain a significant presence in the region. Throughout the Pacific Northwest's brief history, most people have tended not to affiliate with institutional religions and the plurality of religious institutions in the area has prevented any single religion from gaining a

significant foothold (Killen 2004: 10). It is often said, with a measure of cheekiness, that the extreme westward journey for the region's first western settlers forced early frontiers people to unburden themselves from religious devotion before crossing the Cascades. Indeed, westward expansion required a remarkably independent spirit and for those who took up the journey, not having a religious community to leave behind 'back east' made the trek westward all the easier. This is not to say that early settlers were completely devoid of religion. Settlement of the Pacific Northwest included a diverse group which reflected any number of Christian religious traditions. However, the size of the region, the diffuse nature of early settlements and the absence of any single religious tradition or denomination emerging as a formidable social and cultural force all contributed to the area's historical lack of religious affiliation. Even today not having a religious confession is the norm rather than the exception in the Pacific Northwest. As the population has continued to grow, institutional religious adherence rates have continued to stay low (Killen and Shibley 2004: 31).

Although it may appear a trivial reason, the overwhelming presence of the area's grand natural environment could also play a role in the high rate of unaffiliated persons in the region. Surrounded by mountain ranges, rivers, inlets and vast supplies of natural resources, early settlers and residents today frequently reflect on nature as a place where they most acutely experience transcendence (Shibley 2004: 156). Finally, in more recent times the relative

affluence of the urban centres of the Pacific Northwest (combined with the fact that the majority of the area's population live in urban centres) could be cited as a partially material cause for the region's current a-religious tendencies.

If lack of affiliation has always been the norm in the region, it would seem improbable that a demographic shift in employment (the rise of the so-called information economy in Seattle) would have any causal relationship to a pre-existing cultural disposition to religious 'un-affiliation'. Indeed, in the light of this, I argue that within the Pacific Northwest the historical lack of a concerted religious presence in the region and the characteristics of independent and hard-working people who live there could be a common cause for both the density of technology workers in the region and the general absence of religion in public life. The free-thinking entrepreneurialism of the region's computer technology industry has as much to do with the region's independent frontier spirit as it does with the region's lack of religious affiliation. Rather than religious 'un-affiliation' breeding CS workers or necessarily a-religious CS workers, it would seem that regional religious trends are influenced by factors outside individual employment statistics.

Spiritual Habits of Technology Workers

Hermeneutics and demography offer a high-level image of techno-theology and its role (or lack of role) in public life. For the remainder of this chapter I will examine the experiences of those who work within the technology industry,

listening to their stories and determining the extent to which religion plays a part in their own lives. Although IT may not itself directly influence the spiritual habits of the region, perhaps by looking at a brief portrait of the religious dispositions of technology workers, we may determine if they reflect a distinct spiritual outlook. Perhaps then we could see if the aforementioned techno-theology is really at play within their culture.

The Portrait of a Company

My research into the particular spiritual practices of CS workers reflects nearly a decade of casual encounters as a participant observer within one particular internet company. Although I have worked at various points within the information economy in Seattle, what follows will reflect my time with a small internet media company (The Company) where I worked from 2000–2002 and again from 2006–2007. The Company swelled with millions of dollars of venture capital during the boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s and managed to survive the collapse of the dot-com economy in December 2001, despite a significant reduction of staff and available capital. The Company has turned into an internet success story, having recently been acquired by a larger multinational media conglomerate. Typical of many early technology companies of that era, its initial technical staff included an eclectic mix of individuals from a variety of personal and professional backgrounds. In the light of the high demand and low supply of university trained computer scientists, The Company

(before its acquisition) drew technologists from fields as far ranging as business management, English literature, anthropology and divinity. Many of its first computer software developers and IT specialists came into the CS field because of the promise of easy wealth, although most comment that they stayed in the CS field because they found the work to be creatively stimulating and intellectually challenging. The industry allowed a hobby-interest (in many cases) to blossom into a lucrative career with tremendous room for upward mobility. Not unlike the characters in Coupland's *MicroSerfs* or the tragically comical case studies in Lessard and Baldwin's *NetSlaves* (2000) in exchange for a work week of 80 hours and more, employees were provided with free food and drink, a casual working environment and stock options. Today The Company's technology and software development groups include more properly trained technologists. In 2002 one of eight technologists was university trained, whereas in 2007 the ratio was one in two.

Interestingly, at the same time that The Company's technology staff was becoming increasingly professionalized, the ratio of staff who self-selected for religious affiliation also shifted. In 2002, of the eight technologists employed, only one self-selected for religious affiliation, whereas at the time of writing the ratio was one in four. Of those who self-selected for no religious affiliation, half were exposed to some kind of formal religious upbringing, but left their initial faith behind. The majority of these pronounced themselves to be agnostic and the most common reason for their agnosticism is the belief that religion is irrelevant

to contemporary life. In casual conversation, several individuals on at least three occasions commented that the inconsistent attitudes of Christians on issues regarding sexuality and morality were reasons for their incredulity towards religion as a whole. Two objected to religious faith principally on intellectual grounds, citing the stories which organised religions told as interesting on an historical or pedantic level, but on the whole they viewed scientific narratives to be more convincing and more relevant for their personal lives. Among those with a religious affiliation, the sense that they were in the minority was readily felt. Even those with a proselytizing faith (Evangelical Christians, for instance) rarely discussed religious matters unless prompted to do so. In conversations outside working hours or in social situations when religion was addressed, those with religious faith seldom contributed. A woman who described herself as an evangelical Christian said that it was her role to evangelize by her lifestyle and her love of her co-workers rather than by trying to discuss her beliefs in a public setting. Among both affiliated and unaffiliated, religion was perceived very much as a private subject.

Case Studies

To get to the heart of the religious practices and beliefs of The Company's staff, I interviewed a handful of technologists, asking them about their professional biographies, their exposure to religion (both in their formative years and at present) and if they recognized any overlap between religion (or religiously

informed ethics) and technology. Three such studies follow.

The first is Phil, a software developer in his late 30s. He has been involved in CS for 14 years. He was attracted to a career in IT because of the potential for social networking online and he has never felt the stereotypical draw to gadgetry as a reason for his career choice. Phil sees web as the great equaliser. It empowers individuals with disparate interests and levels of influence to be united through their use of a common technology. Although technology can be used for positive ends (like providing social networks or giving the disenfranchised a voice in society), technologies are generally 'benign'; Phil sees them as neither ethically positive or negative. The ethics of technology emerge from technology use, not from technologies themselves.

Phil's spiritual life is varied. Growing up on an island in the middle of Puget Sound, renowned for its New Age influences and openly practising neo-pagans, Phil was raised in a nominally Lutheran home, but influenced by 'occult' spiritualities from a young age. When asked if he continues to practise either New Age spiritualities or Lutheran piety, he notes that no form of organized religion appeals to him. He considers himself to be non-religious, but spiritual, saying that 'God cares about you, not about you going to church'. However, he still feels some residual 'Lutheran guilt' for turning his back on his confirmation vows. When asked further about his idea of God, he says that God can be found in all things: 'God doesn't mind putting on drag, everyone comes to God [in some way] because God loves us [all]'. Phil and his partner have a pre-teen

daughter whom they have intentionally not raised with any religious influences or education. They both feel that she should be allowed to find religion on her own rather than being forced into a religious mould by her parents.

Religion, Phil feels, may have some value to culture and society (by preserving concepts like honour or value), but on the whole it is simply an organized system which puts into practices and words what is intrinsic to all people. All people have a sense of the good, of honour and value; religion is merely a particular example of this. Whereas organized religion had little role to play in his day-to-day life, Phil claimed that spirituality was a powerful influence on him and his family. When asked what the practical components of their spirituality are, he commented that he believes in a kind of *open source* spirituality where they are free to draw on all traditions as they suit their present need. I found this to be an interesting metaphor, as it reflects the discourse surrounding the open-source programming movement in CS. Phil treats religion (or software, for that matter) as something which grows from the constant reworking of one's self and one's peers:⁶

Although technology may provide Phil and his family with a metaphor for talking about spirituality and ethics, it does not offer anything close to what we could see as a competing religious meta-narrative. Contrary to the concerns raised by Ward, the sociality which Phil experiences online empowers him to

⁶ A typical lay example of the open-source philosophy is the online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia. Anyone can add, remove or edit an entry, which makes all participants equals who have a common responsibility to maintain the encyclopaedia and make a common investment in the quality of the work. FOR EDITOR: DRAW LINK TO MOODY'S CHAPTER

build a vibrant community of like-minded people. Unlike the hopes voiced by speculative scientists regarding technology's potential, technology for Phil and his family is firmly rooted in the practicalities of the lived life. They are not holding out hope for technology to usher in a utopian future.

The second case is Sam, who like Phil, has been involved in the CS industry for most of his professional life. Even as a child he was immersed in computing technology, as his father was a CS professional working with AT&T in Southern California. Growing up around computers, Sam took a shining to the problem-solving opportunities which CS provided. He was drawn into, and remains within, the field because of the creative aspect of CS and the thrill of problem solving which his career provides. He grew up in a strictly religious home, moving from the Adventist tradition of his youth to a non-denominational Evangelical church in his adulthood. Although he does not attend church every week, he and his family try to attend at least several Sundays a month. Outside public worship, he reads religious literature, particularly writings which deal with the relationship between religion and science. Unlike Phil and Peter (see below), Sam appears to be more attracted to the analytical rather than the creative element of CS. His relationship to religion and spirituality reflects this analytical perspective. Sam has persisted in his faith, because it is both a part of his core self-identity *and* because it provides a cohesive world view which he understands to be both rational and self-consistent. His interest in science and religion is an attempt to better understand this religious world view in

conjunction with the scientific paradigm that informs his professional life.

Like the other interviewees, when asked about the relationship between technology and religion, he seemed to draw a blank. He understood technology as a purely neutral entity which is assigned ethical significance by those who use it. Religion may influence our use of technology, but it has no other relevance to the field. For Sam, his religious world view is the principal locus for his sense of hope, identity and goodness. He sees technology and science as important, but in purely utilitarian terms.

The third case is Peter, a 27-year-old software developer who studied CS at university. He initially pursued software development because of the promise of easy wealth. In the late 1990s when Peter was trying to determine his college major, the promise of US\$80,000 annual salaries in the industry was a powerful draw for a young man from a rural working class part of Washington State. Peter grew up in a nominally Christian home; during his early 20s while at university, he was a devout Presbyterian under the tutelage of a particularly dynamic minister in his university town. After he had left university, Peter's faith involvement lessened. Peter became disenchanted with the church's anti-science stance, its position towards same-sex relations and evolution, arguing that those who work in technology and the sciences are rational people who look to science and reason to guide their ethics. He has no problem believing in an omnipotent creator God, the divinity of Christ or even miracles. His principal problem with Christianity is the church, which he sees as both irrational and the source of a

hypocritical and selective morality. In the light of his self-professed agnosticism and current lack of religious affiliation, I asked Peter how he arrived at notions of truth, beauty, goodness or meaning. He confessed that he seldom thought about such things. 'Religion isn't that complicated', he quipped. Religions are a source of guiding principals which are ultimately very personal. When asked about the potential for technology to supplant religious beliefs or narratives, Peter wrinkled his forehead and appeared to be put off by what he characterized as a very 'science-fictiony' question.

In my conversations with technology workers in the Pacific Northwest, it emerged that their religious views appear to had little to do with their choice of vocation and their choice of vocation had little to do with their religious views. When asked if they see any connection between religion and technology, no one was able to articulate any kind of sensible response which evinced anything like the techno-theologies posited by the cultural commentators, philosophers, theologians and technologists discussed above. It would seem that religious affiliation among computer technology workers are more influenced by family, community and life situations than by any conscious antinomy towards religion, as related to their sense of vocation.

When my respondents were plumbed further for indicators of techno-theology (reification of technology, utopian hopes invested in the future of technology or a sense of technologies' dystopian potential), none showed the least bit of interest in such speculations and most dismissed such talk as mere

fictional musings. Rather than finding some kind of deeper meaning in technology, nearly all of those who were asked at this dot-com why they originally pursued a career in CS either cited monetary reasons or a desire to solve problems and create interesting computer programmes. CS has been a career that these individuals have pursued in order to facilitate particular lifestyle goals and to provide them with work that is enjoyable and challenging and that facilitates a solidly middle-class lifestyle. Their vocation does not correlate to an unusual love of, or hope in, technology. Their religious dispositions seem more related to regional norms than anything intrinsic to their choice of work.

Conclusion and Areas for Future Work

In late 2007 Thomas Goetz, an editor at *Wired* magazine, published a short piece outlining the importance of research which produces results contrary to the author's initial thesis. He stated:

So what happens to all the research that doesn't yield a dramatic outcome—or, worse, the opposite of what researchers had hoped? It ends up stuffed in some lab drawer. The result is a vast body of squandered knowledge that represents a waste of resources and a drag on scientific progress. This information—call it dark data—must be set free. (Goetz 2007: 031)

When I started this project, I assumed that the connection between one's lack of religious affiliation and one's employment within the CS industry was a given. After all, nearly all of my reading suggested an antinomy between religion and 'technology cultures' and my casual encounters with those employed in the field

gave me the impression that the logical and scientific mindsets of technologists were simply incommensurable with religious faith. What I have found, however, is that one's religious self-selection reflects more variables than just one's vocational self-selection. This project has uncovered 'dark data' regarding the spiritual habits of technology workers. Even though this data may not conform to my original presuppositions, it does open up interesting avenues of reflection regarding the Church and its ongoing relationship with a technologically savvy culture.

Techno-theology may be implicit within certain strands of academic discourse, but as a concept it fails to fully account for attitudes towards technology advanced by those who work within the IT industry. Rather than replacing religious predilection with technological substitutes, the dot-com workers in Seattle come to, remain within or reject religion for reasons unrelated to their involvement in the IT or CS field. As a practical theologian who works within the diverse inter-relationships between church and culture, I find these data supremely interesting. It suggests two points which could influence future work within the realm of church and culture.

Firstly, with regard to practical theology's social-scientific interests in the study of religion in public life, new ways of conceiving spirituality apart from functionalist descriptions of religion need to be pursued. I came to this research assuming that a functionalist definition of religion or theology applied to the role played by technology in public life. I assumed that the hermeneutical study of

technology and culture which repeatedly proffers such a position (in my own work as well as that of others) would somehow relate to the way individuals understood technology's role in their own lived life. In my study, I repeatedly found it difficult to identify (or correlate) a functionalist theory of religion which the idea of techno-theology relies upon. The problem with asking about the idea of 'techno-theology' is that it implies that the research subject would have some kind of reference for theology or religion in the first instance, apart from the way theology and religion are commonly understood. I would have had a similar problem using the term 'spirituality' with regard to technology, as all three terms (theology, religion, spirituality) have extant definitions within public life, which are different from the more rich and multivalent usage within academic discourse.⁷ Simply put, I wonder how practical theologians who are attempting to think in a social scientific way about theology and religion can have a meaningful dialogue with their research subjects, when they are in effect using different definitions of the same words.

Secondly, the ambivalent attitude towards technology as a cultural or religious force (e.g. techno-theology) evinced by my 20-something and 30-something respondents represents an important cultural disposition towards technology. Rather than the gadget-ridden or high-tech-loving stereotype that is often assigned to geeky CS and IT professionals, these individuals did not exhibit

⁷ This is similar to problems found by Gordon Lynch in his study of the religious elements of rave culture in his *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (2005: 176).

the kind of technological fetishism that one would expect. It would appear that the trend towards ubiquitous computing, social networking technologies and high-touch rather than exclusively high-tech uses of technology has become the dominant way of approaching technology in the life of the contemporary CS or IT worker. To this end, from the perspective of the ministry and mission of the church in a technologically savvy culture, churches would be wise to rethink the importance of dazzlingly high-tech uses of technology in worship and proclamation. Is it truly necessary to seem cutting edge by employing the latest gadget or technique or would the mission of the church be better served by placing technology in the background? As technologies of information continue to become increasingly ubiquitous and transparent, it would seem that less ostentatious uses of technology would be a prudent move. The gadget culture of the 1990s which was epitomized by the flamboyant spending among the newly minted dot-com rich seems to be in decline. In its stead, contemporary users of technology are favouring the ability of technology to facilitate collaboration and community, two things for which the Christian church could find an immediate resonance.

In sum, this research has indicated to me that it is a false thesis to assume that technology is the idol of the masses. Rather than being viewed as objects of worship that are competing with organized religion, technologies are rather viewed as value-neutral functional tools which serve an end that is dictated by their use. Perhaps we have stepped out from the millennial techno-fetishistic

frenzy of the 1990s and entered, in the twenty-first-century context, into an age where technology is rightly absorbed into the life world and becoming less a locus for hope or a portent of destruction and more a conveyance of pre-existing social goals. For theology, I would suggest that rather than treating technology as an evil to be overcome, we should begin to pursue critical reflection on technology which seeks to govern its use and implementation by ways of the strong values of the Christian meta-narrative.

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Metropolitan Area	NARA Region (% Religiously Unaffiliated by Region)	% Religiously Unaffiliated Pop. (County)⁸	Working Pop.⁹	Pop. Working in CS	% Working Pop. In CS	Pop. Working in Dev.	% CS pros in Dev.	% all workers in Dev.
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	Pacific (47.3)	51.3 (Santa Clara)	866300	67560	7.80%	22470	33.26%	2.59%
Boulder, CO	Rocky Mountain West (48.3)	44.2 (Boulder)	156250	11630	7.44%	2510	21.58%	1.61%
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV Metropolitan Division	South / Mid-Atlantic (40.3/34.1)	66 (Arlington)	2232510	163750	7.33%	24870	15.19%	1.11%
Framingham, MA NECTA Division	New England (38.5)	23 (Middlesex) ¹⁰	154830	11120	7.18%	3060	27.52%	1.98%
Huntsville, AL	South (40.3)	32.1 (Madison)	190520	11250	5.90%	1630	14.49%	0.86%
Durham, NC	South (40.3)	40.8 (Durham)	252550	14770	5.85%	1810	12.25%	0.72%
Bethesda-Gaithersburg-Frederick, MD Metropolitan Division	Mid-Atlantic (34.1)	38 (Montgomery)	555860	31570	5.68%	4330	13.72%	0.78%
Seattle-Bellevue-Everett, WA Metropolitan Division	Coastal West (62.8)	55.2 (King)	1314870	69510	5.29%	16720	24.05%	1.27%
Colorado Springs, CO	Rocky Mountain West (48.3)	54.9 (El Paso)	243430	12040	4.95%	2400	19.93%	0.99%
San Francisco-San Mateo-Redwood City, CA Metropolitan Division	Pacific (47.3)	42.7 (San Francisco); 53.3 (San Mateo)	951240	45840	4.82%	10970	23.93%	1.15%
Austin-Round Rock, TX	Southern Cross-	42.9 (Travis) ¹¹	686150	31670	4.62%	4080	12.88%	0.59%

⁸ Based on NARA data, Unaffiliated/Unaccounted Adherents as % of total population, by county.

⁹ Labour Statistics Period: May 2005; NARA Statistics Period: 2000. Data extracted on March 3, 2007

¹⁰ Massachusetts has an overwhelming Catholic population, state-wide of 71%.

¹¹ Texas shares its religious population between Catholics (31.9%) and Baptists (27.2%).

	Roads							
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(Chart 1.1)